Aptera

Ministry of Culture and Sports
General Directorate of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage
Ephorate of Antiquities of Chania

-15- Eastern part of the fortification wall, 4th century BC

HISTORY

Ancient Aptera (or Aptara), one of most important city-states of Crete during historic times, was established on the plateau of the 'Paliokastro' hill, which dominates the southeast of Souda Bay.

Among several beliefs about the origin of the city's name the prevailing one seems to be Artemis' attribute: Artemis Aptera. According to another version, the name derives from the mythical hero of Delphi named Pterãs who built the laurel temple of Apollo there. Stephanus of Byzantium, on the other hand, gives an appealing version of the mythical strife of the Muses and Sirens, in which the latter were defeated, threw away their wings (therefore remained "wingless", i.e. apteres in Greek), turned white and fell into the sea.

-3- The two-room temple, 5th century BC

Many ancient geographers or historians refer to the city's location. Among recent travelers, Robert Pashley was the first to correctly identify the specific location with the ancient city of Aptera.

MAP

1 L-shaped roman cistern
2 Three-aisled roman vaulted cistern
3 Two-room temple, 5th century BC
4 Stoa stylobate
5 Later buildings (16th century AD)
6 Roman public building
7 - 8 Roman baths
9 Theatre and rectilinear theatre
10 Roman house with peristyle
11 Ancient street and Heroon
12 West fortification, 4th century BC
13 West cemetery
14 Koules - fortress (Ottoman period)
15 East fortification wall, 4th century BC
16 Main gate
17 German occupation pillboxes

Aptera had two harbours in Souda Bay: Kissamos, located between modern Kalami and Kalyves, and Minoa, identified with the archaeological remains at modern Marathi Akrotiriou. Its position along with the two harbours secured the long-term control of maritime activity over the Gulf of Souda. It also contributed to the development of the city to an important commercial and political center.

Recent archaeological evidence suggests that habitation on the hill began in the 11th – 10th centuries BC. By the Early Hellenistic period the city's construction was more or less complete, its earlier temples having been built during the previous phase.

The 3.480m long fortification wall that encloses the main settlement was built before the mid-4th century BC.

-10- Hypothetical reconstruction of Roman house with peristyle

Silver stater, Artemis - Ptolioikos, 300-280 BC

Horse head from a lamp, 70-100 AD

During the 4th century BC Aptera issues its own coinage, with Artemis on the main side and Ptolioikos, the founder of the city, on the other. Other types depict god Apollo, goddess Hera holding a torch, a bee or a bow.

-2- Roman three-aisled cistern

During the Roman period (69 BC – 365 AD) the city enjoys a new era of prosperity, witnessed by the large public buildings preserved on the site nowadays. The powerful earthquake of 365 AD hit its infrastructure and the urban character of the city to a great extent.

Human presence continues until the Byzantine period (7th century AD), when a powerful earthquake devastates the city. Raids by Saracen pirates have led to the utter demise of Aptera.

Life returned to Aptera some centuries later. In 1196 AD, under Alexios III Comnenus, the Monastery of Saint John the Theologian of Patmos requested and was granted ownership of Aptera in order to exploit its revenues. The surviving main building however dates to the Venetian period (second half of the 16th or early 17th century AD); the smaller annexes are even later. These buildings were constructed at the central part of the ancient city, using material from the ancient public buildings.

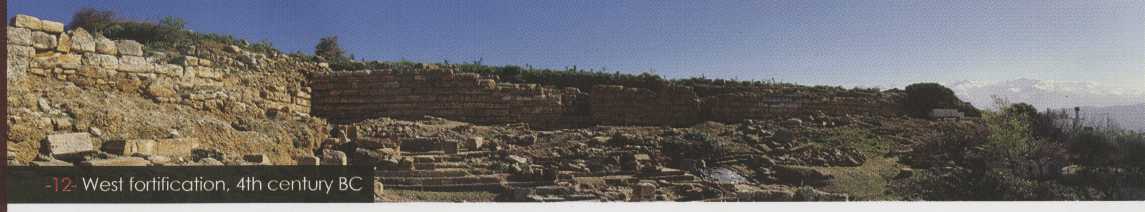
Vessel in the form of a Siren, 2nd - 1st century BC

Funerary relief of a young couple, 2nd century BC

The first excavation at the site took place during the 19th century by the French Archaeological School, which brought to light the so-called 'wall of inscriptions' (today lost). In 1942, the German occupation forces excavated the small two-room temple, dating back to the classical period. The Greek Archaeological Service began (mostly rescue) excavations in 1958. Systematic excavations in the city centre began in 1985–1987 and continue to this day.

Since 1999, the research, protection, and promotion of the archaeological site have greatly benefitted from funding by Regional European Programs (NSRF) and the Public Investments Program of the Region of Crete.

-10- Roman house with peristyle



-12- West fortification, 4th century BC

The **ancient fortification wall** that surrounds the hill of "Paliokastro" clearly defines the city of Aptera during the historical times and constitutes a landmark, beyond which the cemeteries expanded. Three cemeteries covered the burial needs of the people of Aptera, the oldest one being in the west – where access was smooth, since the main gate of the city was there – one at the southeastern entrance of the city and one in the north.

Inscribed epistyle, 2nd century BC

The city's rich families build impressive mausolea outside the fortification wall, close to the main gate. The name of a *pater familias*, Sotirios Protogenios of Eleutherna, is preserved on the inscription of the epistyle of the oldest mausoleum. The inscription stresses the close alliance and friendship between Aptera and Eleutherna in the 2nd century BC.

In the same area inscribed bases dating back to the 1st and 2nd century AD compose a Heroon where prominent citizens of Aptera were honoured.

Within the space covered by the fortification wall around the later building complex and the small temple of Saint John the Evangelist, various ancient monuments are preserved on a certain height.

-11-12- West fortification, 4th century BC and ancient road

The apparent absence of water springs on the large plateau the city occupied dictated the construction of large cisterns from the Hellenistic period. Highly impressive, due to their size and conservation status, are the two **cisterns**, which constitute the largest public constructions built in Aptera during the Greco-Roman times. They were probably providing water in the **baths** that are located further north.

-1- L-shaped Roman cistern

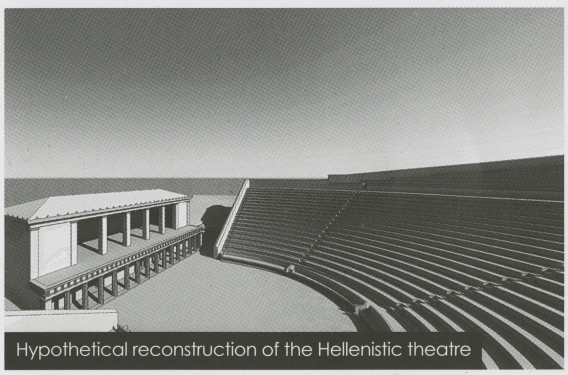
The three-aisled cistern, with interior dimensions of 17×25m and a capacity of 2.900m^{3}of water, is covered with stone vaults that are contemporary with the later buildings. The sturdy piers belong tothe cistern's Hellenistic phase. The other cistern is L-shaped and bears a capacity of 3.050m^3. The cisterns were fed by a system of conduits, which also connected them to smaller cisterns.

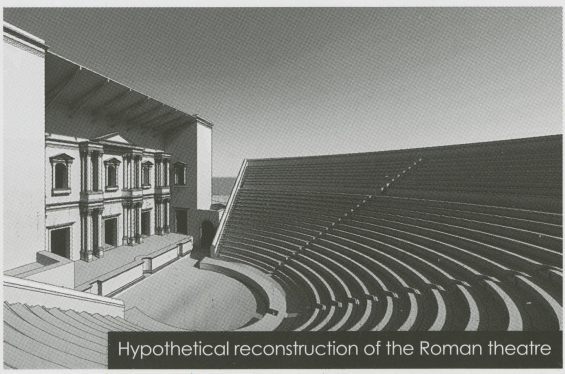
The ancient **theatre** of Aptera is situated near to the southeast entrance of the city into a natural hollow with a southward orientation and a view to the White Mountains. Although it was known and mentioned by many modern travelers, it had not been excavated systematically. In the early 20th century it was severely damaged by a kiln built in the centre of the cavea (koilon). Many seats and other architectural elements were used as fuel.

Hellenistic and Roman period finds from the theatre

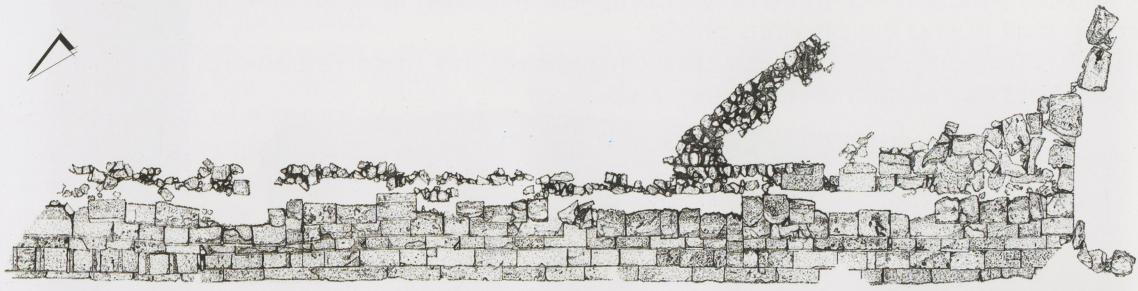
The research and restoration of the theatre took place during the period from 2008 to 2015.

The theater was entirely constructed with the local limestone in the early Hellenistic period (first half of the 3rd century BC). To this phase belong the strong wall south of the scene, the greatest part of the retaining walls of the passageways (parodoi) and the peripheral retaining wall of the cavea (koilon). However, the main parts of the theatre visible today, the **koilon**, the **orchestra** and the **skene**, are dated to the Roman period. In the second half of the 1st century AD the Hellenistic theatre was entirely modified. The cavea shaped into its final form, the scene building (skene) was replaced and the floor of the orchestra was lowered. It is plausible that the final modification of the theatre took place in the 3rd century AD.


Hypothetical reconstruction of the Hellenistic theatre


Hypothetical reconstruction of the Roman theatre

The **parodoi**, which were used by the actors, chorus and spectators to enter or exit the theatre, were covered with arches during the Roman period.
An impressive, in terms of preservation and length (55m in total) **stone-paved street**, dating back to the Hellenistic period, runs along the east side of the theatre. It leads towards important public buildings of the city, shrines included.
A **rectilinear stepped building** (50m length in total) was revealed directly behind the theatre. The building has all the characteristics of a space used for gatherings - a theatre in the ancient sense of the word.



Plan of the rectilinear theatre

Additionally, it functioned as a retaining wall for the epitheatron (upper tier of seats), either to prevent it from falling down or to support it after its western, probably unstable, section collapsed.
A densely residential area lies west and northwest of the theatre. The large **Roman house**, whose systematic archaeological research is in progress with important finds (e.g. the pair of statuettes of the twin ancient Greek gods Artemis and Apollo), was probably constructed after the catastrophic earthquake of 66 AD and completely destroyed during the strong earthquake of 365 AD.

https://vimeo.com/176438470

-9- Aerial photograph of the theatrical edifice and the stone-paved street

Cover - Back cover: Artemis and Apollo

Free of charge. © Ministry of Culture & Sports | Ephorate of Antiquities of Chania

Text Writing - Print Editing: Katerina Tzanakaki **Print Layout:** Isidoros Plakotaris
Translators: Katerina Tzanakaki, Vassilis Varouchakis **Plans-3D Representations:** Isidoros Plakotaris, Nikos Hatzidakis
Photographs: Elias Eliades, Dimitris Tzortzakis, Dimitris Tomazinakis